

Laotze

Dao De Jing

(The Way and Its Power)

English Version by Bob Gonzalez

ONE

The way that can be followed is not the Eternal Way.
The name that can be named is not the Eternal Name.
The Nameless originates Heaven and Earth. The Named engenders All Things.
Ever desireless, you perceive the Essence. Ever desiring, you see only the externals.
Both have the same source but different names. Together they are called mysterious.
Mystery of mysteries: the marvelous gate between them!

TWO

When all under Heaven know Beauty as Beauty, Ugliness appears.
When they know Good as Good, there is Bad.
Something and Nothing generate each other.
Difficult and Easy define each other. Long and Short identify each other.
High and Low contrast each other. Tone and Pitch harmonize each other.
Before and After accompany each other.
Therefore sages act without conflict and teach without words.
All things that arise are not rejected.
Sages create without claiming ownership, benefit without demanding gratitude,
accomplish without taking credit.
It is because they do not take credit that credit is always due them.

THREE

Do not exalt the talented and people will not compete.
Do not value what is rare and people will not steal.
Do not display objects of desire and people will not become agitated.
Therefore sages guide the people in clearing their minds,
nourishing their bodies, diminishing their desires and strengthening their bones.
They assist the people in clearing their minds
and settling their hearts.
They do not allow the clever to create mischief.
Their doing is undoing. Thus everything remains in harmony.

FOUR

The Way is empty yet never exhausted.
It is fathomless, perhaps the source of all things.
If things are sharp, it blunts them. If things are knotted, it unties them.
If things are glaring, it softens them. It unites with all things at the lowest level.
Subtle and mysterious, it is always present.

I do not know its source. It is before Divinity Itself.

FIVE

Heaven and Earth are impersonal. They see all things as passing forms.

Sages are impersonal. They see all people as passing forms.

Heaven and Earth are like a bellows: empty yet never exhausted, active and ever-producing.

Excessive talk and action lead to exhaustion.

Rather, hold onto the center.

SIX

The valley spirit is eternal. It is called "the mysterious female."

The gateway of this mysterious female
is the origin of Heaven and Earth.

Barely perceived, yet always there, its use proves inexhaustible.

SEVEN

Heaven is eternal, Earth is everlasting.

This is because they do not live for themselves.

So it is with sages.

They place themselves behind and find themselves ahead,
disregard themselves and thereby discover themselves,
empty themselves of selfish desires and thereby become completely fulfilled.

EIGHT

The greatest good is like water,
which benefits all things without strife and settles in lowly places repulsive to all.

It is close to the Way.

The excellent dwell lowly, meditate deeply,
speak truly, rule justly, work effectively and act timely.

Never fighting, they are blameless.

NINE

A cup filled to the brim soon overflows. Better to stop short.

A blade honed to the sharpest soon becomes dull.

A house filled with gold and jade is soon emptied.

Reveling in wealth and position soon brings downfall.

Retire when your work is done. This is the Way of Heaven.

TEN

Can you seamlessly integrate body and mind?

Can you concentrate your vital force into the suppleness of an infant?

Can you cleanse your inner mirror until spotless?

Can you love the people and govern them without interfering?

When the gates of Heaven open and close, can you take the female role?

When your understanding is perfected, can you remain detached?

Originate and nurture. Originate but do not possess.
Benefit but not for reward. Guide but do not control.
This is subtle excellence.

ELEVEN

Thirty spokes of a wheel converge on the hub: it is the emptiness that makes it useful.
Clay is molded for a pot: it is the emptiness that makes it useful.
Doors and windows are cut in a house: it is the emptiness that makes them useful.
Thus, substance has value and emptiness is useful.

TWELVE

The five colors blind our eyes. The five tones deafen our ears.
The five tastes dull our palates. Racing and hunting make us crazy.
Rare goods weigh us down.
Therefore the sage stays with the belly and not the eyes,
accepts the one and rejects the other.

THIRTEEN

Favor and disgrace are both disturbing. Honor is as troublesome as one's body.
What is meant by "Favor and disgrace are both disturbing?"
Favor granted is as intrusive as disgrace suffered.
That is what is meant by "Favor and disgrace are both disturbing."
What is meant by "Honor is as troublesome as one's body?"
One's body is the source of trouble. What trouble would one have without a body?
Thus, the ones who see the world as their body are fit to care for the world.
The ones who put aside attachment to a personal self can be trusted with the world.

FOURTEEN

Look for it and you will not see it. Then you will call it invisible.
Listen for it and you will not hear it. Then you will call it inaudible.
Reach for it and you will not touch it. Then you will call it intangible.
These three cannot apprehend it. It is Oneness Itself.
Above, it is not bright. Below, it is not dark.
Barely perceptible, it has no name. then it returns to the Void.
Shape without shape, Form without form, it is misty and obscure.
If you wish to confront it, you will find it has no front.
If you wish to follow it, you will find it has no back.
Remain centered in the Eternal Way, and thereby gain a sane perspective toward the present.
To know the Primal Origin is the essence of the Way.

FIFTEEN

The ancients who pursued the Way were subtle, mysterious, profoundly perceptive,
and too deep to be fully comprehended. At best, there remain these descriptions:
Cautious, as if crossing frozen water. Alert, as if in fear of surrounding danger.
Considerate, as a visiting guest. Supple, like ice ready to melt.

Plain, like an uncarved block. Open, like a valley. Obscure, like troubled waters.
Who, by becoming still, can let the mud settle and the water clear?
Who then, from perfect stillness, can return to flowing movement?
Those who pursue the Way do not want fullness.
Avoiding fullness, they can empty out and renew themselves.

SIXTEEN

Become thoroughly empty. Be steadily quiet.
All things rise and then return. They flourish and return, each one to its source.
This return to the source is called "peace." It is also called "the Way of Nature."
The Way of Nature is eternal. Knowledge of the eternal is enlightenment.
Ignorance of the eternal is dangerous. To know the eternal is to be open-minded.
To be open-minded is to be impartial. To be impartial is to be universal.
To be universal is to be divine. To be divine is to be one with the Way.
To be one with the Way is to be eternal.
Though the body will dissolve, the Way remains forever.

SEVENTEEN

The best leaders are barely perceived. Next best are the ones loved and respected.
Next are the ones feared. Finally, there are the ones despised.
When one does not trust, one will not be trusted.
But after the best leaders do their work with hardly a word, the people say, "We did it!"

EIGHTEEN

When the Way was lost, there arose doctrines of goodness and duty.
Cleverness came and so did wit, and with them came great hypocrisy.
When pure love departed from the family,
it was replaced with codes of responsibility and obedience.
When chaos replaces harmony in a country, we hear about "dedicated governors."

NINETEEN

Abandon your learning, discard your knowledge, and people will benefit a hundredfold.
Abandon your benevolence, discard your righteousness,
and people will become filial and kind again.
Abandon cleverness, discard profit-seeking and thieves will disappear.
These three recommendations must seem uncivilized and incomplete.
Therefore, let me recommend these:
Be plain, remain simple, end selfishness and reduce desires.

TWENTY

What is the real difference between yes and no?
What is the actual distance between good and evil?
Do you fear what all people fear? Where will this confusion end?
Everyone is so happy, as if at a great festival or climbing a tower in spring.
Only I am still, showing no sign of desire, like an infant that has yet to smile.
I am weary and homeless, it seems.

Everyone has more than enough. Only I seem destitute. I must be a fool, a real dullard.
Ordinary people are so bright. Only I am in the dark.
They appear energetic and ambitious. Only I appear to be drifting, like wind on the sea.
Everyone has a purpose. Only I seem stubborn and ignorant.
I am different from them all. I am nursing at the Great Mother's breast.

TWENTY-ONE

Great excellence emerges from the Way. The Way is elusive and evasive.
Elusive and evasive, inside it are images. Evasive and elusive, inside it are objects.
Dark and obscure, inside it is the Essence. The Essence is real; inside it is the Truth.
From the ancient beginning to the present moment
its name has not been forgotten because it originates all things.
How do I know it originates all things? By this.

TWENTY-TWO

Give way to survive. Bend to become straight.
Empty to be filled. Wear out to be renewed.
Have little and gain. Have much and be confused.
Therefore sages embrace the One
and become examples for the universe.
They do not show off, and therefore are bright.
They are not self-righteous, and therefore are distinguished.
They do not boast, and so receive credit. They abandon pride, and so are long-lived.
Because they do not compete, no one competes with them.
The ancient proverb "Give way to survive" is not spoken in vain.
Use it and live long.

TWENTY-THREE

Be like Nature: use few words.
Heavy winds do not last all morning. A downpour does not last all day.
What creates them? Heaven and Earth.
If Heaven and Earth don't go on all day, why should you?
Those of the Way pursue the Way. The excellent pursue excellence. The lost follow Loss.
The Way embraces those who pursue the Way.
Excellence embraces those who pursue excellence. Loss embraces the lost.
If you do not trust, you will not be trusted.

TWENTY-FOUR

One standing on tiptoe is unsteady. One who strides cannot walk far.
One who shows off is not bright. One who is self-righteous is not distinguished.
One who boasts loses credit. One who is proud is short-lived.
The Way sees these as excess food and bodily tumors.
Those who pursue the Way have nothing to do with them.

TWENTY-FIVE

Before Heaven and Earth, there was something undivided and whole.

Silent and empty, it is independent and constant. Omnipresent, it is unceasing.
It may be the mother of all things. I do not know its name. I call it "the Way."
If forced to describe it, I call it "great." Being great, it flows ever-outward.
Flowing ever-outward, it reaches far. Reaching far, it returns again.
Thus, the Way is great. Heaven is great. Earth is great. Royal people, too, are great.
There are four great things in the universe and the royal person is one of them.
People model themselves after Earth. Earth models itself after Heaven.
Heaven models itself after the Way. The Way is self-so.

TWENTY-SIX

The heavy serves as foundation for the light. Serenity serves as center for activity.
That is why sages, when traveling, always keep their mind on their provisions.
Though there are many breath-taking scenes, they remain calm and unemotional.
How could a leader with great responsibility behave emotionally in public?
Behave frivolously and you will lose your foundation.
Behave emotionally and you will lose your center.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The excellent traveler leaves no tracks. The excellent speaker makes no slips.
The excellent counter uses no tallies. The excellent lock uses no bolt yet cannot be opened.
The excellent bind uses no knot yet cannot be unbound.
In like manner does the sage help save people: no one is abandoned.
In like manner does the sage help preserve things: nothing is wasted.
This is called "practicing the light."
Thus the good one is the bad one's teacher and the bad one is the good one's resource.
Whoever does not respect the teacher or value the resource is lost, no matter how intelligent.
This is the essential mystery.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Know the male, guard the female. Be a flowing stream under Heaven.
Being a flowing stream under Heaven, eternal excellence remains and one regains infancy.
Know the white, guard the black. Be a pattern under Heaven.
Being a pattern under Heaven, eternal excellence remains and one regains the Infinite.
Know the glorious, guard the humble. Be a valley under Heaven.
Being a valley under Heaven, eternal excellence thrives,
and one returns to the simplicity of the uncarved block.
When the uncarved block is cut into pieces, it is made into different things.
The sage uses it in its original state and thus becomes the ruler.
Great leaders do not cut.

TWENTY-NINE

If you desire to take over the world and do something to it, you will fail.
The world is a sacred vessel; nothing needs to be done to it.

If you interfere with it, you will ruin it. If you hold onto it, you will lose it.
At times things lead; at times they follow. At times they blow hot; at times they blow cold.

At times they are strong; at times they are weak.

At times they are up; at times they are down.

Therefore the sage avoids extremes, excess and extravagance.

THIRTY

When you assist a ruler with the Way, advise against using force to dominate the country.

Using force results in retaliation. Where armies camp, thorns grow.

In the wake of great war, famine surely follows.

Accomplish your aim, then stop. Do not exploit your advantage.

Accomplish your aim but do not boast. Accomplish your aim but do not gloat.

Accomplish your aim but do not be arrogant. Accomplish your aim but only as a last resort.

Accomplish your aim but without violence.

Things in their prime that use force soon grow old. They go against the Way.

That which goes against the Way soon perishes.

THIRTY-ONE

Even the finest weapons are still instruments of evil. All hate them.

Those who pursue the Way shun them.

The good prefer the left. Warriors prefer the right. Weapons are instruments of evil.

The good do not use them unless forced to. Then they do so with utmost restraint.

If victorious, they do not rejoice because this is to delight in killing.

To do so is to fail in life.

When rejoicing, the left is honored. When mourning, the right is honored.

The lieutenant's place is on the left. The general's place is on the right.

These are funeral rites.

When thousands are killed, they should be mourned.

The victorious should observe funeral rites.

THIRTY-TWO

The Way is constant and nameless.

Though the uncarved block is small, no one under Heaven can master it.

If rulers hold to it, all things obey willingly.

Heaven and Earth unite and sweet dew falls. It naturally falls evenly over all.

When the block is carved, names are needed. When names come, it is time to stop.

Knowing when it is time to stop avoids danger.

The Way is to the world what the ocean is to the rivers.

THIRTY-THREE

One who knows others is learned. One who knows self is illumined.

One who conquers others is forceful. One who conquers self is strong.

One who is content is rich. One who perseveres has purpose.

One who remains steady endures. One who dies, but not in memory, lives long.

THIRTY-FOUR

The great Way flows everywhere, left and right.
All things need it to live, and it holds nothing back.
It does its job but does not take credit.
It loves and protects all things, but does not rule over them.
It is desireless; it may be called "small." All things return to it; it may be called "great."
Greatness is not its purpose, but it achieves greatness.

THIRTY-FIVE

Hold the Great Idea and all under Heaven will come and meet no harm,
only harmony and peace.
Music and food attract passersby, but the Way when spoken has no flavor.
Unseen, unheard, endlessly useful.

THIRTY-SIX

If you feel shrunken, you must at some time have grown big.
If you feel weakened, you must at some time have grown strong.
If you feel rejected, you must at some time have been accepted.
If you feel you have lost, you must at some time have gained.
This subtle insight also states that
if you bend, you can win over the unbending;
if you are soft, you can conquer the hard.
Fish belong in deep waters. Swords belong in their sheaths.

THIRTY-SEVEN

The Way is constantly without strife, but is never inactive.
If rulers keep it, all things willingly mature.
After this, if they desire to act, I would restrain them
with the nameless simplicity of the uncarved block,
which is free from desires.
Desireless, they would find serenity, and harmony would come to all under Heaven.

THIRTY-EIGHT

High virtue is not aware of virtue. Therefore virtue remains.
Low virtue is always aware of Therefore virtue is lost.
High virtue does for nothing and thereby does everything.
Low virtue always does for something yet leaves much undone.
High benevolence acts without selfish intent.
High morality acts with selfish intent.
High ritual acts and when no one complies, rolls up a sleeve to enforce compliance.
Thus, when the Way is lost, virtue becomes the standard.
When virtue is lost, benevolence becomes the standard.
When benevolence is lost, morality becomes the standard.
When morality is lost, people resort to ritual.
Ritual is the outermost shell of faith and loyalty, and the beginning of chaos.

Knowledge of traditions is the flower of the Way but the beginning of folly.
Thus the great ones stay with the thick and not the thin,
with the fruit and not the flower, accepting the first and rejecting the other.

THIRTY-NINE

In ancient times, these achieved the One:
Heaven achieved the One and became clear. Earth achieved the One and became steady.
Spirits achieved the One and became potent. The Valley achieved the One and became full.
All Things achieved the One and became fruitful.
Rulers achieved the One and became world models.
They all became what they are by the One.
Without its clarity, Heaven would crack.
Without its steadiness, Earth would shake.
Without their potencies, spirits would be exhausted.
Without its fullness, the valley would be dry.
Without their fruitfulness, All Things would die off.
Without their exemplary natures, rulers would fall.
Thus, humility is the root of greatness. The low is the foundation of the high.
This is why rulers call themselves orphans, widows and paupers.
This is remaining low and humble, is it not?
Rather than jingling like jade, they rumble like rocks.

FORTY

The Way moves to balance. The way uses yielding.
All under Heaven are born of Being. Being is born of Nothingness.

FORTY-ONE

When superior students hear of the Way, they practice it diligently.
When mediocre students hear of the Way, they sometimes believe and sometimes disbelieve.
When inferior students hear of the Way, they laugh uproariously.
If they didn't laugh, it would not be the Way.
Therefore the old saying goes: "The bright way seems dark."
The way of advance seems to retreat. The level way seems uneven.
Great power appears like the valley. Great purity seems stained.
Abundant power seems lacking. Steady power seems shaky.
The Great Square has no corners. Great talent matures late.
Great sound is silence. Great form is formless.
The Way is concealed and nameless, yet only the Way can benefit and fulfill all things.

FORTY-TWO

The Way gives birth to the One. The One gives birth to the Two.
The Two gives birth to the Three. And the Three gives birth to All Things.
All Things carry the shadowy, embrace the sunny,
and blend their vital forces to achieve harmony.

People hate to be orphans, widows and paupers. Yet rulers refer to themselves this way.
Thus gain comes from loss and loss comes from gain.
What others have taught, I also teach: "A violent life leads to an unnatural death."
This is the basis of my teaching.

FORTY-THREE

The softest of all things overtakes the hardest of all things.
That which has no substance can penetrate where there is no entrance.
From this I know the advantage of doing nothing.
This teaching without words, this advantage of doing nothing:
few understand it.

FORTY-FOUR

Name or life: which is more precious? Life or wealth: which is more valued?
Gain or loss: which is worse? Thus, one who desires much will spend much.
One who hoards much will lose much. One who knows contentment is not disgraced.
One who knows when to stop is safe and lives long.

FORTY-FIVE

Great perfection appears imperfect, yet its usefulness never ends.
Great fullness appears empty, yet use will not exhaust it.
Great straightness seems crooked. Great skill seems inept.
Great eloquence seems mute.
Movement overcomes cold, stillness overcomes heat.
Stillness and clarity make one a guide for all under Heaven.

FORTY-SIX

When the Way is pursued, horses haul manure.
When the Way is lost, horses are bred for war.
The greatest fault is wanting too much.
The greatest trouble is discontent. The greatest flaw is greed.
Therefore, if you know that you have enough, you will always be content.

FORTY-SEVEN

You don't have to go outside to know the world.
You don't need to look out of a window to know the Way of Heaven.
The further you go, the less you know.
That is why the sage knows without going,
understands without looking, succeeds without straining.

FORTY-EIGHT

Learning is daily gaining. The Way is daily losing.
More and more is lost until one does no act.
When one does no act, nothing is not done.
No act for gain can gain the world.
Act for gain and lose the world.

FORTY-NINE

The sages have no personal preferences, but accept the people's preferences as their own.

"I am good to those who are good. I also am good to those who are not good.

Thus I become good.

"I am honest with those who are honest as well as with those who are dishonest.

Thus I become honest."

The sages have no separate view but blend with the people's mind.

The people all strain their eyes and ears while the sages see them in the innocence of infancy.

FIFTY

When life goes out, death comes in.

There are thirteen entrances to life, thirteen entrances to death,
and the entrances to life-in-death are also thirteen.

Why is this? Because of excessive living.

It is said that those who know to preserve their life well
meet no wild animals or weapons of war.

No buffalo horn will strike them, no tiger claw will touch them,
no thrusting blade will penetrate them.

Why? Because they do not allow death an entrance.

FIFTY-ONE

The Way originates them, Vigor nourishes them,

Nature forms them and Experience matures them.

Thus All Things treasure the Way and cherish Vigor,
not out of obligation but spontaneously.

The Way originates;

Vigor nourishes, raises, protects and educates.

Therefore, originate without taking possession,
accomplish without taking credit, nourish without interfering.

This is the way of subtle vigor.

FIFTY-TWO

All under Heaven have a beginning because all under Heaven have a mother.

When we find the mother, we can know her children.

Knowing the children, yet returning and staying with the mother,
we will be safe all our life long.

Block the passages. Close the doors. and all your life long you will enjoy peace.

Open the passages. Increase your activities. And all your life long you will be lost.

To see the small is called "insight." To guard weakness is called "strength."

Use your insight to cultivate illumination and thereby save your life.

This is called "practicing long life."

FIFTY-THREE

If I had only a little learning as I walked a broad way, I would only fear straying.

The broad way is smooth, but people think by-ways are better.
The palace is magnificent, but the fields are overgrown with weeds.
The granaries are empty, but the royal garments are elegant.
Men carry sharp swords but glut themselves on food and drink.
They have more wealth and possessions than they could ever possibly use!
This is robbery. It is certainly not the Way.

FIFTY-FOUR

What is well-established will not be uprooted. What is well-embraced will not slip away.
It will be honored for generations to come.
Cultivate yourself and excellence is realized.
Cultivate your family and excellence overflows.
Cultivate your community and excellence endures.
Cultivate your country and excellence abounds.
Cultivate the world and excellence is everywhere.
Thus, the way you see others comes from the way you see yourself.
The way you see other families comes from the way you see your family.
The way you see other communities comes from the way you see your community.
The way you see other countries comes from the way you see your country.
The way you see the world comes from the way you see your world.
How do I know the world? Using this.

FIFTY-FIVE

One who is full of vigor is like an infant. Poisonous insects do not sting him.
Fierce beasts will not attack him. Birds of prey will not strike him.
His bones are weak, his muscles soft, but his grip is firm.
He is unaware of sexual intercourse, yet his organ is aroused, showing his vitality is primed.
He cries all day without getting hoarse because he is in perfect harmony.
To know harmony is called "the eternal." To know the eternal is called "illumination."
To force long life is ominous. Mentally controlling the breath is violent.
Things in their prime that use force soon grow old. They go against the Way.
That which goes against the Way soon perishes.

FIFTY-SIX

One who knows does not speak. One who speaks does not know.
Block the passages. Close the doors. Blunt the sharpness.
Untie the knots. Soften the brightness. Blend with the dust. This is primal union.
One who does this cannot be attracted or repelled,
benefitted or harmed, honored or disgraced.
This state is the most valuable one.

FIFTY-SEVEN

Govern the nation with straightforwardness. Wage war with tactics.
Win the world with spontaneity.
How do I know this? Using this:

The more the restrictions, the poorer the people.
The more the weapons, the more the troubles.
The more the cunning, the more the viciousness.
The more the laws, the more the thieves.
Therefore the sage says: "I act naturally and people grow by themselves.
I love peace and people straighten themselves.
I have no personal business and people prosper by themselves.
I have no selfish desires and people simplify themselves."

FIFTY-EIGHT

When the government is subtle and silent, the people are happy and honest.
When the government is strict and unforgiving, the people are angry and rebellious.
Misfortune underlies fortune. Fortune underlies misfortune.
Who knows when it will end?
If there is no right, then what is right becomes wrong, what is good becomes evil.
Indeed, the people have been confused for a long time.
Therefore the sage is square but not cutting, sharp but not piercing,
expansive but not imposing, luminous but not dazzling.

FIFTY-NINE

In ruling a nation and serving Heaven, nothing compares with restraint.
To be restrained is to return before straying.
To return before straying is to build much vigor.
By building much vigor one can overcome all obstacles.
If one can overcome all obstacles, one will become limitless.
Becoming limitless, one inherits a kingdom.
One who possesses the mother of a kingdom endures long.
This is called "deep roots and firm branches."
It is the way to long life and lasting vision.

SIXTY

Governing a large nation is like cooking a small fish.
When all under Heaven is governed by the Way, spirits have no power.
Not that they lack power, but their power does not harm people.
Another has power but does not harm people.
The sage does no harm to people. Where both do no harm, they circulate vigor.

SIXTY-ONE

A great country is like the lowlands where all streams flow to unite.
It is the concourse of the world, the female of the world.
The female conquers the male by serenity. Serenity is "being under."
Therefore, if the large country wants to win a small country,
it must get under the small country.
If the small country wants to win a big country, it must stay under.
The great country wants to absorb the small
and the small country wants to blend with the great.
Both get their wish.

Therefore, the great country should get under.

SIXTY-TWO

The Way is the shrine of all things.

It is the treasure of the good and the refuge of the bad.

Good words buy honor; good deeds elevate the doer.

Even one who is not good is not abandoned.

Therefore, when the emperor is crowned and the three ministers are installed, rather than sending horses with jade, kneel and offer the Way.

Why did the ancients value the Way?

Is it not because those who seek will find and those who have sinned will be made free?

This is why all under Heaven value it.

SIXTY-THREE

Work without straining. Act without interfering. Enjoy the subtle flavor.

See the large when it is the small. See the many when they are the few.

When injured, respond with your true nature.

Undertake the complex task while it is still simple.

Build a large project from a small beginning.

Complex tasks grow from simple tasks; large projects begin small.

Therefore the sage nurtures the small until it grows great. Easy promises are hard to keep.

If you think things are easy to do, you may find them hard to do.

Therefore, the sage looks for the hard in the easy and ends up finding things really easy.

SIXTY-FOUR

What lies still is easy to hold. What has not emerged is easy to handle.

What is brittle is easily shattered. What is little is easily scattered.

Confront the issue before it appears. Organize before chaos grows.

A tree one can embrace grows from a tiny sprig.

A nine-tiered tower begins as a mound of earth.

A journey of a thousand miles begins where you stand.

To act is to ruin; to grasp is to lose.

Therefore the sage does no act and therefore ruins nothing, reaches for nothing and therefore loses nothing.

People often fail just on the verge of success.

But if one is as careful at the end as at the beginning, failure fails.

Therefore the sage desires desirelessness, does not value rare goods, learns by unlearning, leads people back to what they missed by allowing all things to be what they are, not by interfering.

SIXTY-FIVE

Ancient leaders who pursued the Way

did not burden the people with complicated instruction,

but guided them with simplicity.

People are difficult to rule when they are too clever, too full of useless knowledge.

So, ruling by intellect afflicts the nation but ruling by simplicity benefits the nation.

If you know the difference between these two ways of ruling, you possess a time-tested guide.

To follow this guide is called "subtle vigor." Subtle vigor is deep and fundamental.

It is the ability to return to the Source of Primal Harmony.

SIXTY-SIX

Rivers and seas are king of a hundred valleys because they remain below them.

Hence, they are king of a hundred valleys.

Thus, in order to be above people, describe yourself as supporting them.

In order to lead people, stand behind them.

The sages, when above people, are no burden on them. When in the lead, do no harm.

The world joyously, tirelessly, praises them.

Because they do not compete, the world cannot compete with them.

SIXTY-SEVEN

Everyone tells me that my Way is vast and unlike anything else.

It is vast precisely because it is unlike anything else.

If it was like anything else, it would long ago have become small.

I have three treasures which I protect and nurture.

The first is pure love, the second is self-discipline,

the third is daring not to get ahead in the world.

From pure love comes the ability to conquer fear.

From self-discipline comes ability to benefit others.

From daring not to get ahead in the world comes ability to lead the world.

To attempt to conquer fear without pure love,

to attempt to benefit others without self-discipline,

or to attempt to lead the world

while trying to get ahead in the world is sheer suicide.

Pure love is the mightiest sword and the strongest shield.

Heaven fortifies with pure love the one whose life it would save.

SIXTY-EIGHT

A skillful warrior is not imposing.

A skillful fighter does not become angry.

A skillful employer humbles himself.

This is called "the excellence of not competing."

This is called "the strength to employ people."

This is called "matching the ancient principle of Heaven."

SIXTY-NINE

The strategist says,

"I dare not take the offensive but rather the defensive.

I dare not advance an inch but rather retreat a foot."

That is to say,

"I march without moving.

I roll up my sleeve without baring my arm.

I stand off without attacking.
I carry weapons without being armed.
The greatest mistake is underestimating the enemy.
Doing so could cost my treasures."
Thus, when two sides take up arms against one another,
the reluctant one will win.

SEVENTY

My sayings are very easy to understand and very simple to put into practice.
But no one in the world can understand or practice them.
My words have an origin; my deeds have a mentor.
Because people do not understand these, they do not understand me.
Few people understand me and therefore I stand out.
Thus, the sage wears plain clothes and carries a jade heart.

SEVENTY-ONE

To know what you do not know is wellness.
To think you know what you do not know is sickness.
When you are sick of sickness you will not be sick.
Sages are not sick because they are sick of sickness.
That is why they are not sick.

SEVENTY-TWO

If people do not fear power, then greater power will come down on them.
Do not narrow their environment. Do not oppress their lives.
Only when they are not oppressed will they cease to be restless.
Therefore sages know themselves but do not show themselves,
love themselves but do not exalt themselves.
They accept the one and reject the other.

SEVENTY-THREE

One who needs to display courage risks death.
One who is content to contain courage ensures life.
Either way is both good and bad.
Heaven's preference is unknowable. The sage also finds this difficult.
The Way of Heaven never struggles yet always wins,
remains silent yet always responds, is not summoned yet always arrives,
never worries yet skillfully plans.
Heaven's net is vast and wide-meshed. Even-so, it loses nothing.

SEVENTY-FOUR

When people do not fear death, of what use is the threat of death?
Suppose people did fear death and offenders could be caught and executed.
Who would dare?
There is a master executioner who kills.

To try to take the place of this master is like trying to carve wood for the master carpenter.

Those who try to carve wood for the master carpenter rarely escape cutting their own hands.

SEVENTY-FIVE

The people are starving because rulers consume them in taxes.

That is why the people are starving.

The people are unruly because rulers do too much. That is why the people are unruly.

The people take death lightly because rulers live life excessively.

That is why the people take death lightly.

It is only by taking death lightly that life becomes valuable.

SEVENTY-SIX

At birth, we are soft and gentle. At death, we are hard and stiff.

All things such as grass and trees are supple and soft when living, withered and dry when dead.

Therefore, hard and stiff are like death, soft and gentle are like life.

An inflexible army never wins. A tree that doesn't bend will break.

The hard and great fall. The soft and gentle rise.

SEVENTY-SEVEN

The Way of Heaven is like bending a bow. The high is lowered, the low is raised.

The excess is reduced, the lacking is supplied.

The Way of Heaven reduces the excess and supplies the lacking.

Humankind is not so. It reduces the lacking to supply the excess.

Who has enough left over to offer to all under Heaven? Only those of the Way.

Thus the sage benefits without demanding gratitude, accomplishes without taking credit, and has no desire to show off.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

Under Heaven, nothing is softer or more supple than water.

But for attacking the hard and strong, it has no equal.

All the world knows that supple overcomes hard, yet no one practices it.

Thus the sage says,

"One who accepts the blame of the nation is hailed as ruler of the land.

One who bears the country's burdens is fit to rule the world."

Straight words seem crooked.

SEVENTY-NINE

Even when a great quarrel is settled, some resentment remains. How can this be made good?

Thus sages keep their part of the agreement but do not insist the other parties do so.

Those of excellence take care of their part.

Those without excellence are concerned about the other parties fulfilling their part.

The Way of Heaven has no preference but it always works through those of excellence.

EIGHTY

Let the community be filled with few people.
If they have tools and weapons, let them lay idle.
Because they take death seriously, they will not be anxious to move away.
If they have ships and carriages, they will abandon them.
If they have weapons and armor, they will find them useless.
Let people return to reckoning with knotted cords.
Let them enjoy their food, delight in their clothing,
be happy with their homes and content with their way of living.
Even though neighboring communities can see one another
and hear each other's dogs bark and roosters crow,
yet each will leave the other alone while it grows old and dies.

EIGHTY-ONE

True words are not beautiful. Beautiful words are not true.
The good do not argue. Who argues is not good.
The wise are not clever. The clever are not wise.
Sages do not hoard.
The more they do for others, the more their lives are enriched.
The more they give to others, the more they receive.
The Way of Heaven benefits without harm.
The way of sages is to act without competing.